
The MCAA Advisory

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From the Editor

The lead and only article in the January issue of the Advisory is a superb piece of work. Authors Chris Neuzil, Lenny Vaccaro and Todd Creekman define the challenge—the many mysteries surrounding the Thomas Truxton medal—and then proceed to provide us with well-researched, eloquent answers. As has been done with other landmark articles, we will do an offprint featuring full page text and full page images. This edition, limited to 25 signed and numbered copies, will be available to MCA members at \$50 while supplies last.

Medal auctions this past month were led by Stacks' annual sale of Americana. Notable items included an original Fleury medal (\$4025 all in) no less than three of the scarce 1839 mint copies of the Daniel Morgan medal (\$1380, \$970, \$1610) two undated George III peace medals (\$10,925, \$5750) and an 1823 Washington/Lafayette counter stamp (\$9,200)...

The highest prices were fetched by the middle size Polk peace medal (\$29,900), the skull and crossbones Washington funeral medal (\$23,000) and the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural medal (\$34,500).

In the absence of our president, the club meeting at the New York International was chaired by Vice-president John Sallay. John introduced Ira Rezak, who gave an outstanding presentation on medals commemorating the Jewish presence in America. A record gather of forty, plus or minus, demonstrated Dr. Rezak's drawing power. Following the presentation, Ben Weiss updated the group on the website; a more detailed account of great progress and great plans will appear in the February issue. John then led a discussion of how technology may impact communications between MCA members and with the public in the future. Finally, Bob Fritsch and Gerard Muhlman starred in our first ever Show-and-Tell. Kudos to Mr. Sallay for conducting a highly successful event.

A “Medal Most Shamefully Executed”

The Unlikely Story of Captain Thomas Truxtun’s Congressional Medal

(by Chris Neuzil, Lenny Vaccaro, and Todd Creekman)

Fifteen years after gaining independence, the United States found itself in an undeclared war with its former French allies. France’s relations with America were guided by pragmatism, and her first concern was her ongoing conflict with Britain. Thus, it was most inconvenient when the United States resumed trade with Britain after gaining independence, and French men-of-war and privateers seized U.S. merchantmen suspected of trading with Britain. American commerce was stifled and losses to American merchants and their insurers began to mount, forcing the United States to act.

Enter the infant U.S. Navy and Captain Thomas Truxtun (1755-1822) (Fig. 1). An experienced American mariner who commanded a privateer in the Revolutionary War and later gained extensive experience in the China trade, Truxtun admired Britain’s naval traditions and harbored a strong disdain for the French. He supervised construction of the 36-gun frigate *Constellation* in Baltimore and took command after she was launched in September, 1797. Following the vessel’s fitting-out period, Truxtun was ordered to the West Indies as part of Commodore John Barry’s West Indies Squadron. The squadron was ordered to provide a naval presence and deter French marauders.

Truxtun did more than provide a presence. In February 1799, off the island of Nevis, *Constellation*, which he had fitted with 48 guns, defeated the French 52-gun frigate *L’Insurgente*. He and his men returned home in triumph and sailed again for the Caribbean at the end of the year. On February 1, 1800, *Constellation*, now armed with 50 guns, chased and engaged *La Vengeance*, a French 54-gun frigate. In heated action off Guadeloupe (Fig.

2) that severely damaged the two ships, Truxtun nearly captured his French opponent. *La Vengeance* apparently struck her colors, but the signal went unseen in the smoke, rough seas and advancing dusk. The French captain had no choice but to continue the fight until he and his battered ship were able to slip away in the night. Accounts of casualties vary, but all agree that *La Vengeance* suffered most. Ferguson¹ reports 39 killed and wounded on *Constellation* while noting reports of French casualties ranging from 68 to 160.

Truxtun’s second aggressive defense of American interests met with wide, though not universal, acclaim. Josiah Parker of the House Naval Affairs Committee introduced a resolution to award Truxtun a gold medal, but some legislators found the damage to the *Constellation*, and the real possibility she could have been lost, sobering. Virginia Representative John Randolph and a handful of other House members argued that Truxtun had unnecessarily risked his men and ship,² a position of some merit in view of America’s small navy. Randolph and other naysayers were distinctly in the minority, however, and the resolution passed the House, 87 to 4, on March 24, 1800. Three days later, the Senate concurred, and the joint resolution calling for the President to award a gold medal to Truxtun was approved on March 29,³ less than two months after the battle.

However, it was not until February 3, 1802, almost exactly two years after *La Vengeance* was defeated, that President Thomas Jefferson presented the gold medal to Truxtun at a dinner in his honor.⁴ That medal still exists, although finding it proved an unexpected challenge. Medal specialists Gib Willis and Alan Weinberg, both recalled to us

seeing the medal in a Smithsonian exhibit several years ago. We were greatly surprised when our inquiries to the Smithsonian's Numismatic Division met with firm and repeated denials that the medal was in their collection. However Gib and Alan are keen observers and their recollections were quite consistent. We decided to keep trying, and it is well that we did. Following an inquiry, curator Kathy Golden of the Military History and Diplomacy Division of the Smithsonian located Truxtun's medal, which was no longer on exhibit (Fig. 3).

The Truxtun Medal

Truxtun's is the first Congressional medal known to have been made in America and, as such, is of immense historical and symbolic significance. It helps us understand how Congressional medals and surrounding customs evolved, and is the distant ancestor of today's Medal of Honor and other modern Congressional medals. In particular, the Truxtun medal set the stage for numerous large and visually striking medals awarded by Congress to military and naval heroes of the War of 1812. Unfortunately, its history has been a source of confusion among researchers, collectors and dealers.

Using contemporary documents, we assembled many missing pieces of the medal's saga, and, truly, it was a saga. The full story unfolds over an eight-year period, and its cast of characters includes two sitting Presidents and two iconic Philadelphia Mint engravers. At least six different versions of the Truxtun medal are known today, with many conflicting theories about how they came to be.

In 1800 the young U.S. Mint had virtually no experience striking medals. Typically larger than coins and having higher relief, medals are much more technologically challenging to produce. Hardening dies by heating and quenching (cooling by immersion in liquid) was particularly risky. Medal dies tended to

have more internal flaws, making them more prone to fail in response to thermal stress than smaller coin dies. Quenching often caused them to bulge or crack, and occasionally to shatter.

The Mint had attempted only one Congressional medal prior to Truxtun's, the *Comitia Americana* award mandated by the Continental Congress for Revolutionary War hero Henry Lee. The obverse die cracked in several places during quenching, and the Mint apparently never struck the medal. Alan Stahl reported in *Coin World* (see bibliography) the existence of a gold disk engraved to Henry Lee in the numismatic collection of Princeton University, and speculated it was a substitute award. However, a replacement die-struck medal may have been made. In *Comitia Americana and Related Medals*,⁵ John Adams and Anne Bentley describe a die-struck Lee medal similar to the original, but differing in details and apparently not struck at the Mint. All other Congressional medals for the Revolutionary War were produced in France. (It is an irony of history that the first Congressional medal successfully made without France's help was Truxtun's award for defeat of a French ship!) The Mint's second attempt to make a Congressional medal – Truxtun's – very nearly failed as well.

The pioneering status of the Truxtun medal may account for its unusual design, which features exceptionally wide and heavy rims, reminiscent of the British "cartwheel" pennies of 1797. Legends were added to the rims after striking, avoiding the need to punch lettering near the dies' edges. The fact that punched devices near the edge encouraged die cracks is apparent from the number of early U.S. coins displaying this style of die failure.

Contemporary documents offer a glimpse of the Truxtun medal die-making and striking process. On March 5, 1801, nearly a year after the Congressional resolution, George Harrison, the Navy agent in Philadelphia, wrote to Mint Director Elias Boudinot asking that the dies be prepared.⁶ On March 23, Navy Secretary

Benjamin Stoddert instructed Harrison to have the dies engraved from drawings he would send.⁷

The source of the drawings is not known, but it could not have been Truxtun. On June 13, presumably having seen drawings or test impressions, Truxtun wrote to his friend and shoreside agent Charles Biddle⁸ that the medal design was “badly executed indeed—the profile shamefull.” He enclosed a profile he thought was better executed, but still “no great likeness.” He also complained of the battle scene: “The position of the ships in the reverse is proper enough & the hulls are very well—but the rigging and masts not regular.” He described in great detail the correct state of the masts and rigging of both ships.

In the same letter, Truxtun added that a Colonel Parker (probably Congressman Josiah Parker of the House Naval Affairs Committee, who had served as a colonel under General Washington during the Revolutionary War) advised him a gold chain would be an “indispensable appendage” and should be given as “a thing of course.” However, the resolution made no such provision, and we can be reasonably certain that Truxtun himself provided the hanger and, if it existed, a gold chain.

On June 19, 1801, Truxtun wrote Biddle,

The profile and reverse I shall send on from N Y. You had better see Mr. Harrison and stop proceedings for the present—as I expect to give a more perfect sketch from Mr. Robertson at N Y than you have yet seen of either. Mr. Stoddert is not to Blame that the medal was not delivered ere this—he wished it complete—others are to blame S. Smith is the man that bares no good will towards me.⁹

“Mr. Robertson” was highly regarded New York artist Archibald Robertson. The promised sketch presumably was the basis of Robertson’s miniature portrait of Truxtun (see [Fig. 4](#)). “S. Smith” refers to acting Navy Secretary Samuel

Smith,¹⁰ who was at odds with Truxtun over various matters. Despite Truxtun’s suspicions, we found no evidence that Smith did anything to delay the medal.

It is unclear whether proceedings were halted; if any modifications were made to the obverse die, however, they must have been minimal. The portrait can only be called unflattering—it shows the captain exceptionally jowly and corpulent. One can’t blame Truxtun for disliking it. Likewise, none of the inaccuracies in masts and rigging were corrected.

Whatever disappointment Truxtun felt about his medal’s design was trumped by pride in his accomplishment. This much is clear in a letter he sent to Biddle the day after he received the medal.

February 4th 1802

Dear Sir,

I enclose you a letter from the Secy. of the Navy to Mr. Harrison ordering the Die at my disposal. You will cause one hundred copies struck on composition—fifty of which I have wrote Mrs. Truxtun that you will send her, ten you will be pleased to send me by first good opportunity to Norfolk (the first ten struck) as I have sent the golden medal home, which was presented by the President yesterday. Twenty you will send to the Secy. of the Navy as soon as possible. Ten you will keep for your family and ten for Mr. Harrison.

I expect that Mr. Scott [Mint Chief Engraver] will lose no time in striking of these copies and that you will My Dear Sir be particularly careful in complying with their distribution in the shortest time possible.

I don’t mean that the die shall be used to strike off a single one more than the hundred as it will injure it [the die]. And I request that you will send the die and the fifty copies to Mrs. Truxtun as soon as they are done.

I am in great haste Dr. Sir

Your very obt. Servant
Thomas Truxtun

P.S. Pray attend to all the above.
P.S. I expect that Mr. Harrison
will pay for the one hundred copies
when he pays for the medal die etc and
bring in the same in his bill against the
publick. At all events strike them. In
every other Country a number is struck
at the publicks expense but as the die is
given me I ask only for one hundred
copies of composition.¹¹

Accustomed to the absolute authority of a ship's captain at sea, Truxtun apparently had difficulty adopting a less imperious tone on land. He was extremely anxious to have copies of the medal in "composition" (white metal), no doubt to show and give as gifts to friends, associates and dignitaries. Aside from the personality insight it provides, this letter underscores the procedural vacuum surrounding this pioneering Congressional medal. Those involved were feeling their way through *terra incognita*. Because the Congressional resolution did not call for extra medals in any metal, we believe Truxtun paid for them himself. His own uncertainty on this point is revealed when he directs that the composition copies be made "at all events," that is, regardless of whether it was at "the publicks expense." More interesting was his certainty the dies would be given to him for future use. Later events leave no doubt they were U.S. property and remained at the Mint.

Although Truxtun's gold medal was presented by President Jefferson, the authorizing resolution was passed during John Adams' administration.¹² Truxtun held Adams in high regard and sent him a white-metal version of his medal. That Adams reciprocated Truxtun's high esteem is evident from his November 30, 1802, letter:

The copy you have done me the
honor to present to me of the Medal
voted by Congress, and executed

according to my direction to the
Secretary of the Navy, I accept with
great pleasure, not only from a
personal regard to the giver, but I
esteem every laurel conferred upon
you for the glorious action of the first
of March, 1800, as an honor done to
our beloved country. . . .

I regret that the artist had not
completed the Medal in season, that I
might have had the satisfaction of
presenting it to an officer who so
greatly deserved it; and I lament still
more that I had not the power of
promoting merit to its just rank in the
navy, that of an admiral.¹³

These were warm sentiments indeed!
Adams' final clause, which might seem mere
flattery, was, in fact, true; no rank of admiral
existed in the U.S. Navy until 1862.¹⁴ Later
correspondence adds an interesting bit of
closure to this chapter, namely that the entire
cost to the "publick" to make the dies and strike
Truxtun's gold medal was a paltry \$137.¹⁵ To
place this sum in perspective, we note that each
of more than two dozen Congressional medals
for the War of 1812 cost three to five times as
much.¹⁶

The Plot Thickens . . . and Twists

Questions have long surrounded the
Truxtun medal. How many versions exist and
in what metals? Which, if any, were made at
the time of the gold medal, and which are later
restrikes? Who engraved the dies? How was the
rim lettering added? When were copy dies
made, and why? How many of various versions
were struck? We can now address these
questions with some confidence.

The late Stewart Witham, a collector and
highly regarded researcher, was greatly
interested in early medals, including the
Truxtun issue, as well as early federal coinage.
He recognized much could be learned about
early coining techniques by studying the Mint's
medal-making successes—and failures. His
discoveries regarding the Truxtun medal were

important and paved the way for future research, but the key part of the story eluded him.

Our own voyage of discovery began when Lenny Vaccaro purchased a white-metal Truxtun medal with lettered rims (Fig. 5). Any Truxtun piece with lettered rims is of interest because such pieces are so rare; almost all struck examples that appear for sale have blank rims. In addition, early Congressional medals in white metal usually (as is the case with the War of 1812 medals for Army heroes) were produced at the same time as the gold presentation pieces, presumably, as in Truxtun's case, as extras for the honoree to present as keepsakes.

Examination of the white-metal Truxtun revealed a startling fact: its dates for both the battle and the Congressional resolution differ from those on Truxtun's gold medal as described and illustrated by Loubat!¹⁷ We made this confusing discovery before locating and examining Truxtun's own gold medal, and when we finally did locate it, we found Loubat's illustration to be entirely accurate. The gold medal correctly dates the action as February 1st and the Congressional resolution as March 29th, while the white-metal version cites March 1st and March 24th (Fig. 6). The obvious question lay before us: how did this come about? We found the answer in the papers of Thomas Jefferson, who now reenters our story.

More than *six years* after receiving the gold medal, Truxtun either noticed, or (we think more likely) someone else pointed out, that the dates on his gold medal were wrong! We can only imagine his consternation and embarrassment. How could this have happened? How had he failed to notice?

It is helpful to know that in March 1802, only a month after receiving his medal, Truxtun resigned from the Navy in a huff. His resignation resulted from a dispute over his prospective appointment as Commodore of the Navy's Mediterranean Squadron. He expected

a "flag captain" to be assigned to handle day-to-day operations of the flagship, freeing him to focus on the squadron, but Navy Secretary Robert Smith (brother of Truxtun's old nemesis Samuel Smith) declined to make such an appointment.¹⁸ The dispute left Truxtun feeling ill-used, and the unfortunate errors on his medal undoubtedly added fuel to the fire. He must also have been embarrassed by the fact that the white metal pieces he presented as gifts bore the errors. In his effusive letter quoted earlier, for example, John Adams referred to "the glorious action of the first of March, 1800," apparently quoting the erroneous date directly from his medal.

Truxtun complained in writing to Navy Agent Harrison, who had originally ordered the medal. Without the authority or means to fix the problem, Harrison suggested Truxtun write directly to President Jefferson. On May 22, 1808, Truxtun wrote instead to Navy Secretary Smith. Perhaps he perceived an opportunity to embarrass Smith; he unquestionably saw another chance to criticize the medal's design. Truxtun noted that, "In the first place the medal is most shamefully executed and many severe remarks have been made by [Captain Edward] Preble . . . and others elsewhere of its execution as well as by every artist who has seen it." Having fired that salvo, he then got to the heart of the matter:

On the medal the action between the Constellation and La Vengeance man of war is stated to have taken place on the first of March 1800 whereas that action was on the first of February—one month before—again—on the medal the date of Congress granting me a Golden medal Emblematical of this action is stated to have passed on the 24th of March 1800—whereas it was passed and became a law of the land on the 29th of the same month.

He closed with a rather unconvincing explanation for why he hadn't discovered the errors earlier:

As no copy of the resolution of Congress accompanied the delivery of the medal as is common It was not at the time compared with the law, and hence the defects in dates were not discovered as early as they would have been.¹⁹

Interestingly, Truxtun did not mention another apparent discrepancy in the legends — the number of guns carried by *Constellation* at the time it encountered *La Vengeance*. Most accounts place the number at 50, while the legend refers to the vessel's original rating: UNITED STATES FRIGATE CONSTELLATION OF 38 G.

Smith forwarded Truxtun's letter to President Jefferson on May 26 with the reasonable recommendation that the government correct the inscriptions.²⁰ The President thereupon instructed Smith, in a letter dated May 31, 1808, to contact either Mint Director Robert Patterson or Secretary of State James Madison (to whom the Mint Director then reported) to request correction of the errors. Amazed by the mistakes, Jefferson added, "The only difficulty in the case is to conceive how such anachronisms could have taken place."

Because of personal interest and experience, Jefferson had a better understanding of minting than might be expected of a President. He had proposed our decimal system of coinage, had overseen production of the Comitia Americana medals in France, and had oversight of the Mint as Secretary of State under President Washington. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that he added, "It will not, I suppose, be necessary to make a new die. That would be serious [we could substitute *costly*], and not to be undertaken without consideration."²¹ This essentially ended any possibility of a new portrait.

Injured Dies

On June 3, 1808, Navy Secretary Smith reported to Truxtun that he had written George Harrison, asking him to approach Mint Director Patterson about correcting the die and having new medals made.²² On June 11, Patterson responded to Harrison that Truxtun had returned his medal to the Mint. Interestingly, he also noted that new dies would cost \$600 and interrupt Assistant Engraver Johann Reich's work on Mint business, which clearly meant producing coinage dies. Indeed, Reich would have been quite busy making half dollar dies with his Capped Bust design, which had been introduced only the year before. Finally, and most importantly for our story, Patterson also reported examining the original dies. He noted that a piece had broken away from the "head die," and that both dies were so "injured by rust as to be utterly unfit for further use."²³

More than 30 years ago, Stew Witham discovered intriguing evidence that the obverse die damage Patterson described probably occurred while copies of the gold medal were being struck at Truxtun's request. Julian²⁴ notes that Witham found mention of a mishap in the New York Morning Chronicle of October 15, 1802 (Fig. 7). The newspaper reported that "owing to an accident in the mint very few impressions were struck."²⁵ Witham correctly inferred that the "accident" was loss of a fragment from the obverse die because copper restrikes from that die invariably display an impressive cud (Fig. 8).

While examining the original gold medal at the Smithsonian (Fig. 9), we paid particular attention to the obverse field in the area where the die later broke. We were surprised to find that die damage already was apparent; there is noticeable buckling that must have occurred during hardening. The buckling, somewhat more advanced, is also visible on the Vaccaro white-metal specimen. We suspect Truxtun knew of the damage; it is otherwise difficult to account for his 4 February 1802 admonition to Biddle that "I don't mean that the die shall be used to strike off a single one more than the

hundred [white-metal copies] as it will injure it.”

How many white-metal pieces were struck before the die failed? We know Truxtun received two pieces by March 31, 1802, because he wrote Biddle that day acknowledging receipt and noting he was returning them because they lacked inscriptions.²⁶ White-metal versions are extremely rare; we are aware of only two in addition to the Vaccaro specimen that are held by the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Naval Historical Foundation.

The miniscule population of white-metal survivors suggests very few were struck, and we originally estimated 10 to 15. That estimate was wrong. After an abbreviated version of this article went to press in *Numismatist*,²⁷ we found a March 13, 1802 letter to Aaron Burr from Truxtun’s agent Charles Biddle. The letter is preserved in Aaron Burr’s memoirs,²⁸ and in it Biddle writes that:

Mr. Eckfeldt brought me five medals, four of which I sent by Mr. Ross, the other shall be disposed of as you direct. The die of Truxtun’s medal broke after fifty-two had been struck. I suppose Truxtun will feel more pain for this accident than he would to hear of the death of his friend T. Coxe.

With fifty-two struck, the survival rate (unless others surface) is a bit under 6 %. This is somewhat less than survival rates of silver naval Congressional medals for the War of 1812, which are often about 10 – 15 %, but seems comparable with rates for many Indian Peace Medals, which typically have a few survivors from similar mintages. All three known white metal examples of Truxtun’s medal exhibit tin pest, possibly because of the alloy used. Perhaps this led to many being discarded. Also interesting is Biddle’s sarcastic remark about the die’s breakage causing Truxtun more distress than the death of a friend.

Correcting the Medal

Truxtun’s medal shows the dates were corrected. How was this accomplished? A June 15, 1808, letter from Jefferson to Navy Secretary Smith is particularly important in this regard and provides fascinating insight into the President’s experience with Congressional medals:

I have considered the letter of the Director of the Mint stating the case with which the errors of Commodore Truxton’s [sic] medal may be corrected on the medal itself and the impracticability of doing it on the die. In my former letter to you on this subject I observed that to make a new die would be a serious thing, requiring consideration. In fact, the first die having been made by authority of the legislature, the medal struck, accepted and acquiesced to for so many years, the powers given by that law are executed & at an end, and a second law would be requisite to make a second die & medal. But I presume it will be quite as agreeable to Commodore Truxton [sic] to have his medal corrected in one way as another, if done equally well, and it certainly may be as well, or better done by the engraver and with more delicate traits. I remember it was the opinion of Doctor Franklin that where only one or a few medals were to be made, it was best to have them engraved [rather than struck from dies]. The medal being corrected, the die becomes immaterial. That [the die] has never before been delivered to the party, the medal itself being the only thing voted to him. I say this on certain grounds, because I think this and Preble’s are the only medals given by the U.S. which have not been made under my immediate direction. The dies of all those given by the old Congress & made at Paris remain to this day deposited with our bankers at Paris. That of General Lee, made in Philadelphia, was retained in the mint. I mention this, not as of consequence whether the die be given or retained, but to show that there can be no claim

of the party to it, or consequently to its correction. I think therefore the medal itself should be corrected by Mr. Reich; that this is as far as we can stretch our authority, and I hope it will be satisfactory to the Commodore.²⁹

The last sentences in this excerpt suggest that Truxtun or his allies had pressed for correcting the dies, perhaps in the belief that the portrait could be improved at the same time. Jefferson invoked a legalistic counter-argument: because the dies were not Truxtun's, he could not insist they be fixed.

Before examining Truxtun's gold medal, we expected to find the rims had been lapped to remove the original lettering prior to applying the correct inscriptions. Such a technique seems to have been used on at least one white-metal copy that is now lost. Cast and electrotype copies of at least one such host medal are known with a reverse rim that clearly was lapped, bringing it flush with the exergual line below the ocean (Fig. 10). The ANS collection contains such a piece which is plated by Julian.³⁰

Once again, however, the gold medal confounded expectations; neither the obverse nor reverse rim showed lapping. Gold apparently was applied to fill the incuse lettering, after which corrected legends were applied. Like the original legends, the new ones were punched rather than engraved. The rims were then very lightly lapped to remove metal upset by the punches. We know the original lettering was applied with gang punches, rather than engraved, because small misalignments between letters are identical on the three known white-metal specimens. Gang punches probably were not used for the corrections, because it appears the Mint corrected only Truxtun's gold medal and none of the white-metal pieces.

Correcting the date of the Congressional resolution was an entirely different kettle of fish. The exergual reverse legend was punched into the die and, unlike the incuse lettering applied after striking, in raised relief. The

method of correcting this error was rather inelegant; the digits "24" simply were ground away and incuse digits "2" and "9" punched in their place.

Jefferson's letter desiring that Reich make the corrections leaves little doubt it was he who punched the new legends. As perhaps the most skilled craftsman at the Mint, Reich was the natural choice for the task. In this vein, we note that the corrected legends on the gold medal were applied with great skill and care.

Who Engraved the Dies?

Both Witham and Julian³¹ argued that Reich engraved the original Truxtun dies, but we strongly doubt it. It is true that Reich was in Philadelphia at the time and probably available to do the work. However, Witham was influenced by an 1815 letter in which Reich referred to certain "errors" Truxtun disliked.³² Unaware of Reich's role in correcting Truxtun's medal, Witham assumed Reich's familiarity with the errors meant he had engraved the dies.

Contradictory evidence includes the Morning Chronicle article, which states that "the die was engraved by Mr. R. Scott, of the Mint, Philadelphia."³³ We put significant weight on this contemporary account, but most convincing to us is the fact that stylistically the Truxtun medal is unlike any of Reich's known work. The Truxtun dies are rendered in a more naïve style. The differences are plain when Reich's depiction of a naval battle on Isaac Hull's War of 1812 Congressional medal is compared with the scene on the reverse of Truxtun's medal (Fig. 11). On Hull's medal, the sails and pennants are shown so skillfully they seem to ripple and billow in the breeze; the sails and pennants on Truxtun's medal are amateurish. It is clear to us that the Truxtun dies, including the portrait the captain so detested, were the work of Robert Scot, the Mint's chief engraver in 1802.

The Saga Concludes

We have not discovered when the corrections were completed, nor when the gold medal was returned to Truxtun. The first documentation that the piece again was in his custody is a letter he wrote to Biddle on August 13, 1810. Truxtun directed Biddle to arrange for the display of his medal and other items at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, adding that it was deposited with the Bank of Pennsylvania.³⁴ By September 1810, the medal had been safely delivered to the Academy.³⁵ Ten years later, in November 1820, Truxtun recorded a will leaving the medal to his daughter Gertrude.³⁶ It apparently passed to her when he died two years later.

The Medal's Legacy

U.S. Congressional medals for military heroes evolved dramatically in the two centuries that followed. After producing the Truxtun tribute, Mint Director Boudinot apparently felt ready to tackle new medallic challenges; the medal voted to Commodore Preble in 1804 for the Barbary War with Tripoli is larger (64mm versus 57mm), with legends punched into the dies. It became the template for the magnificent Congressional medals awarded to War of 1812 heroes, many of whom became household names, including Stephen Decatur and Oliver Hazard Perry, and two of whom, Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison, later were elected president. In size and ornamentation, Congressional medals reached their zenith only a few decades later with the intricately designed and massive pieces voted to Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor for the Mexican War (90mm) and Ulysses S. Grant for the Civil War (105mm). The latter conflict also saw the democratization of Congressional medals with the first awards for individual gallantry. These first official Medals of Honor owe their existence to the Truxtun medal, a piece featuring a “shamefull”

portrait and erroneous legends struck from a die that nearly failed before it could be used. The difficulties that plagued Truxtun's medal mirrored the country's growing pains as it began to flex its muscles to advance national interests. For numismatists, the story of the Truxtun medal reveals the technological limitations of the first U.S. Mint, making it a key part of America's numismatic story.

Collectibility

Most versions of the Truxtun medal are very scarce to rare. Truxtun's original gold medal is unique and, unfortunately, not on display. Collectors should not despair, however, as a variety of obtainable versions exist.

Least expensive and probably most readily available are the modern, yellow-bronze copies. Even these are somewhat challenging to find, but Internet auction sites have made the task easier. Usually obtainable for a few tens of dollars, they are within most collectors' reach.

Cast and electrotype copies with lettered rims, while encountered infrequently, also tend to be reasonably priced, commanding something in the neighborhood of \$100. Serious collectors may wish to look for these as well as for copies struck in copper from mid-19th century copy dies. These nearly always have blank rims, although some have engraved rim lettering presumably added outside the Mint. They also have reflective, bronzed finishes that typify copper medals made at the Mint between about 1860 and 1890. Nineteenth century copies are scarce and appear for sale infrequently; they usually sell for \$200 - \$400. Pieces with engraved rims are prized – and difficult to find. A nicely gilded specimen with engraved rim lettering sold in 2002 (see variety 4a below) for \$3,450.00.

Also desirable are restrikes from original dies that display a large obverse cud and die rust on both sides. These require patience — long periods have passed between market

appearances. They are legitimately rare but have been modestly priced. One sold by private treaty in 2007 for \$800.

Finally, if there is a “holy grail” of Truxtun medals, it is the contemporary strike in white metal. Aside from its undeniable rarity (three known, including only one - the Vaccaro specimen – in private hands), it is the only one that shows how Truxtun’s gold medal originally looked. Increasing their desirability and historical interest is the fact that all probably were once in the possession of Truxtun or someone close to him and personally presented to friends or admirers.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals provided invaluable assistance and encouragement as we unraveled the Truxtun medal saga. They include Anne Bentley (Massachusetts Historical Society), Kathy Golden (Smithsonian Institution), Robert W. Hoge (American Numismatic Society), Elizabeth E. Fuller (Rosenbach Museum & Library), Peter Irion, Gib Willis, and Alan Weinberg. Special thanks go to Joe Levine (Presidential Coin & Antique Co.), who reviewed the manuscript and supplied information on the Bushnell specimen, and to Jim Cheevers (Naval Academy Museum), who provided a detailed and thorough review of this article.

Appendix I. Truxtun Medal Varieties

Six³⁷ major and several minor Truxtun medal varieties are known. This listing combines our experience viewing medals in institutional and private collections with information in reference works and auction catalogs. We believe it is comprehensive, but other forms could exist. We hope this study will motivate collectors and curators to reexamine their holdings.

- **1.** Original gold medal; corrected legends (punched). Gold hanger attached. **Unique.** The medal presented to Truxtun by President Jefferson and later modified to correct dates of the battle and Congressional resolution. Lettering on obverse and reverse rims redone. On obverse, AE of PATRIAE conjoined. Reverse rim legend reads UNITED STATES FRIGATE CONSTELLATION OF 38 G. PURSUES, ATTACKS & VANQUISHES THE FRENCH SHIP LA VENGEANCE OF 54 G. 1. FEB. 1800. The medal presumably had a collarmark that was obliterated when the gold hanger was attached at the top. (See [Fig. 3](#); Division of Military History and Diplomacy of the Smithsonian Institution).
- **2.** Contemporary strikes in white metal from original, unbroken dies; erroneous legends as punched. **Extremely rare** (3 known: Vaccaro specimen, Naval Historical Foundation specimen (gilded), Massachusetts Historical Society Specimen (holed)). Struck less than two months after the gold medal was presented, they show how Truxtun’s gold medal looked originally. On obverse, AE of PATRIAE separate. Reverse rim legend reads U.S. FRIGATE CONSTELLATION OF 38 G. PURSUES ATTACKS & VANQUISHES THE FRENCH SHIP LA VENGEANCE OF 54 G. 1. MAR. 1800. Vaccaro specimen has wide, flat, ridge-type collarmark at 12 o’clock. A specimen described as a “tin proof” and with the identical reverse rim legend appeared as Lot 1711 in the

June 1882 Bushnell Sale. The catalog states, "This is one of the rarest medals of the American series, but very few are known, probably not more than two or three. Of the highest rarity and very valuable." (See [Fig. 5](#)).

- 2a. Cast or electrotype copies (generally bronzed) of white metal strikes

with original, erroneous reverse rim legend. Uncommon. ([Fig. 12](#)).

- 2b. Cast or electrotype copies (generally bronzed) of white metal strikes

with reverse rim heavily lapped and corrected reverse rim legend;

one such piece is illustrated by Julian.

Uncommon. ([Fig. 13](#)).

- 2c. Electrotype gilt brass shell (obverse only, no reverse) of original

white metal strike with rim legend. (ca. 1820 or later) One seen.

- 3. Copper restrikes from original dies after breakage; blank rims. **Rare** (perhaps 4 to 8 known). Made with broken obverse die and rusted reverse die. The obverse displays a large cud in the left field; "rust pimples" dot the reverse battle scene. At least one piece exists with the cud crudely ground off. These are not contemporary with the gold and white metal pieces; they probably were struck beginning about 1860. (See [Fig. 8](#)).
- 4. Copper facsimiles from copy obverse and original reverse dies; blank rims. **Very Scarce** (about 25 known). The obverse die probably was reproduced no earlier than

1860. Obverse distinguished by truncation of curl of Truxtun's hair that projects into the field on the original die. Reverse die exhibits rust pimpling, especially in sky and clouds. These were undoubtedly made for collectors, with the notable exception of one example donated by a Truxtun descendant to the Decatur House Museum. ([Fig. 14](#)).

- 4a. Copper facsimiles from copy obverse and original reverse dies; engraved rim legends, with corrected dates. **Rare** (2 identified: one in the Decatur House Museum collection and one in private hands

sold by Bowers and Merena in the November 2002 Gilbert G.

Steinberg Sale). ([Fig. 15](#)).

- 5. Silver facsimile from copy obverse and original reverse dies; blank rims. One example traced to the Garrett Sale. This can only be a piece de caprice produced by the Mint (ca. 1870 - 1880), perhaps to emulate War of 1812 Congressional medals of which silver versions were mandated for subordinate officers.
- 6. The more common yellow bronze and rarer silver facsimiles from later obverse and reverse dies struck in the 20th century; known with both blank and lettered rims. Part of a series of "national medals" offered by the Mint in the 1960s. These are distinguished by the matte or sandblasted finish and lathe-turned edges found on Mint medals of this era. ([Fig. 16](#))

Notes

1. Eugene S. Ferguson, *Truxtun of the Constellation: The Life of Commodore Thomas Truxtun, U.S. Navy, 1755-1822* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p.157.
2. *Annals of Congress*, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 2 December 1799 – 3 March 1801 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1851), pp. 640–642.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1532.
4. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 4 February 1802, Cooper's Navy, Naval History Society Collection, vol. 1, part 4, p. 422, New York Historical Society, New York City.
5. John W. Adams and Anne E. Bentley, *Comitia Americana and Related Medals*. (Crestline, CA: George Frederick Kolbe, 2007), p. 120-128.
6. R.W. Julian, *Medals of the United States Mint: The First Century, 1792–1892* (El Cajon, CA: The Token and Medal Society, 1977), p.150.
7. Letter, Benjamin Stoddert to George Harrison, 23 March 1801, in United States Office of Naval Records and Library, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935–1938), vol. 7, *Naval Operations from December 1800 to December 1801*, pp. 152–153.
8. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 13 June 1801, folio 38, Collection #2021, Thomas Truxtun Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
9. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 19 June 1801, folio 40, Truxtun Papers.
10. James Cheevers, U.S. Naval Academy Museum, written communication, 19 September 2006.
11. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 4 February 1802.
12. *Annals of Congress*, 6th Cong., 1st sess., p. 1532.
13. Letter, John Adams to Thomas Truxtun, 30 November 1802 in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France*, vol. 2, *Naval Operations from January 1800 to May 1801*, p. 174-175.
14. James Cheevers, U.S. Naval Academy Museum, written communication, 2 November 2006.
15. Letter, Robert Smith to George Harrison, 18 April 1806, in United States Office of Naval Records and Library, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939–1944), vol. 6, *Naval Operations Including Diplomatic Background from May 1805 Through 1807*, p. 419.
16. Chris Neuzil, "A Reckoning of Moritz Furst's American Medals," *The Medal in America, Vol. 2, Coinage of the Americas Conference Proc. 13*, Alan Stahl, ed., (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1999), pp 17-118.
17. Jacques Florimond Loubat, *The Medallic History of the United States of America, 1776-1876*, (New York: author, 1878); New Milford, CT: N. Flayderman & Co., 1967 reprint, p. 128; plate XXII.
18. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 31 March 1802, folio 45, Truxtun Papers.
19. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Robert Smith, 22 May 1808, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651–1827, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

20. Letter, Robert Smith to Thomas Jefferson, 26 May 1808, Jefferson Papers.
21. Letter, Thomas Jefferson to Robert Smith, 31 May 1808, Jefferson Papers.
22. Letter, Robert Smith to Thomas Truxtun, 3 June 1808, folio 74, Truxtun Papers.
23. Letter, Robert Patterson to Thomas Truxtun, 11 June 1808, folio 75, Truxtun Papers.
24. Julian, *Medals*, p. 150.
25. "Honorary Medal," *New York Morning Chronicle*, 15 October 1802, p. 3.
26. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 31 March 1802.
27. Chris Neuzil, Lenny Vaccaro, Todd Creekman, "Captain Truxtun's Congressional Medal," *Numismatist*, (February 2007), 32-41.
28. Letter, Charles Biddle to Aaron Burr, Philadelphia, 13 March 1802, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr, with Miscellaneous Selections from His Correspondence*, vol. 2, ed. by Matthew L. Davis, (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1858), pp 185-186.
29. Letter, Thomas Jefferson to Robert Smith, 15 June 1808, Jefferson Papers.
30. Julian, *Medals*, p. 150.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. "Honorary Medal," p. 3.
34. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 13 August 1810, folio 73, Truxtun Papers of

the Library Company of Philadelphia, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

35. Letter, Thomas Truxtun to Charles Biddle, 12 September 1810, folio 76, Truxtun Papers of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

36. Maria S. B. Chance, *A Chronicle of the Family of Edward F. Beale of Philadelphia*. (Haverford, PA: 1943), p. 84. Copy in Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

37. In the abridged version of this paper published in *Numismatist* we listed seven varieties. For greater consistency and completeness, we added subvarieties and changed the number of major varieties to six.

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Figures and Captions



Figure 1. Thomas Truxtun by Orlando Lagman after Bass Otis, circa 1965. Naval Historical Center, no. 65-033-H. In this portrait Truxtun prominently wears his Society of the Cincinnati badge.



Figure 2. Twentieth century depiction of the running battle between *Constellation* on the right and *la*

Vengeance. Arthur N. Disney, Sr., circa 1969. Naval Historical Center, no. 69-061-C.



Figure 3. Captain Truxtun's gold medal. This medal was personally presented to Truxtun by President Jefferson in February 1802, almost exactly two years after the battle. Truxtun presumably had the gold hanger added. Actual Size: 57mm. Smithsonian Institution, no. 63339.





Figure 4. Portrait in miniature of Thomas Truxtun by New York artist Archibald Robertson. Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, PA.

of tin, white metal is easily struck and minimizes risk to fragile dies. Actual Size: 57mm. Lenny Vaccaro.



Figure 5. Vaccaro specimen of the Truxtun medal struck in "composition," or white metal. Struck soon after the gold medal, this is one of three known survivors of the original mintage of 52 pieces. Composed predominantly

White Metal

Gold



1. Mar. 1800



1. Feb. 1800



24 Mar. 1800



29 Mar. 1800

Figure 6. Legends on Truxtun's gold medal and the Vaccaro white-metal specimen. Smithsonian Institution / Leonard Vaccaro.

HONORARY MEDAL.—On March 24th, 1800, congress voted to commodore Truxton a gold medal, as a mark of their sense of his gallantry, and the bravery of the American tars under his command, in supporting the honor of the American flag. The particular action that occasioned this honorable testimony of national respect, was his engagement in the Constellation, of 38 guns, with the French directorial man of war, La Vengeance, of 54 guns.

Calumny had whispered that this medal, which was voted under the old administration, would be very lamely put in execution under the present—if the vote was at all acted on. We are happy to find that, in contradiction of this report, every attention has been exerted to honor this vote of congress, and the ablest artists in our country employed to carry it into effect. The work was some time since completed, and the medal presented by the president in a very handsome manner, to commodore Truxton. Owing to an accident in the mint very few impressions were struck; of course those few will be objects of demand at a future day. We have seen an impression, and have heard the opinion expressed by a person on whose judgment we can place confidence. According to this information, we consider it superior to any thing of the kind previously executed in this country. We shall not be singular in considering it honorable to our nation thus to distinguish the brave efforts of its citizens.

On one side of the medal is an excellent likeness of the commodore—the inscription,
PATRIE PATRES FILIO DIGNO.
And beneath,
THOMAS TRUXTON.

On the reverse is a representation of the action, with an inscription, nearly in the words of Mr. Randolph, in the debate that preceded the vote of congress.
U. S. FRIGATE CONSTELLATION, OF 38 GUNS, PURSUES, ATTACKS AND VANQUISHES THE FRENCH SHIP LA VENGANCE, OF 54 GUNS, IN MARCH, 1800.
And beneath,
BY VOTE OF CONGRESS TO THOMAS TRUXTON, MARCH 24th, 1800.

The design for the medal and the likeness were by Mr. Archibald Robertson, of this city, and the die was engraved by Mr. R. Scott, of the mint, Philadelphia.

Figure 7. New York Morning Chronicle article of October 15, 1802, describing Truxton's medal and the failure of the obverse die.



Figure 8. Restrikes of the Truxton medal in copper display an impressive cud. Peter Irion.



Figure 9. Chris Neuzil and Lenny Vaccaro (foreground) examine Truxton's original gold medal at the Smithsonian Institution. Todd Creekman.



Figure 10. Detail of an electrotype, presumably a contemporary copy of an original strike in white metal. The corrected legend was applied to the host medal after first effacing the erroneous legend by lapping the rim flush with the exergual line. Gibson Willis.



Figure 12. Lead copy of original white metal strike with incorrect date of battle (1. Mar. 1800). Bronzed. Lenny Vaccaro.



Figure 11. Enlarged views of the Isaac Hull Congressional medal by John Reich (right) and Truxtun's medal (left). Comparison reveals entirely different engraving styles. Although attributed to Reich, the Truxtun dies were almost certainly executed by U.S. Mint Chief Engraver Robert Scot. Hull Medal: Chris Neuzil. Truxtun Medal: Smithsonian Institution.





Figure 13. Bronzed lead copy with corrected legend (1. Feb. 1800). See also Figure 10, Lenny Vaccaro.



Figure 14. Nineteenth century copper restrike from copy obverse and original reverse dies. Blank rims. Lenny Vaccaro.





Figure 15. Gilt Copper struck from copy obverse and original reverse dies. Engraved (not punched) legends with correct battle date. Decatur House Museum.



Figure 16. Twentieth century yellow bronze matte finish copy struck at the Mint. Also found with lettered rims. Lenny Vaccaro.



Letters to the Editor

Dear John:

I also had the good fortune to recently buy 10 of the 14 *Comitia* medals (lacking only the *Libertas*, *Stewart*, *Franklin*, and *Diplomatic* medals, all for the sum of \$257.50. It would be the steal of my avocational career would it not for the fact that the medals are all struck in Pewter. They accompanied a boxed booklet written in 1973 by the Clain-Stefanellis, *Medals Commemorating Battles of the American Revolution*. I can at least take solace in the fact that PCGS would undoubtedly grade all of the medals MS-68!

Best,

Joel Orosz

(Ye editor has a set of *Comitia*'s in golden brass. Displayed in a glass case, visitors think that they are rare and valuable, though they are neither.—ed.)

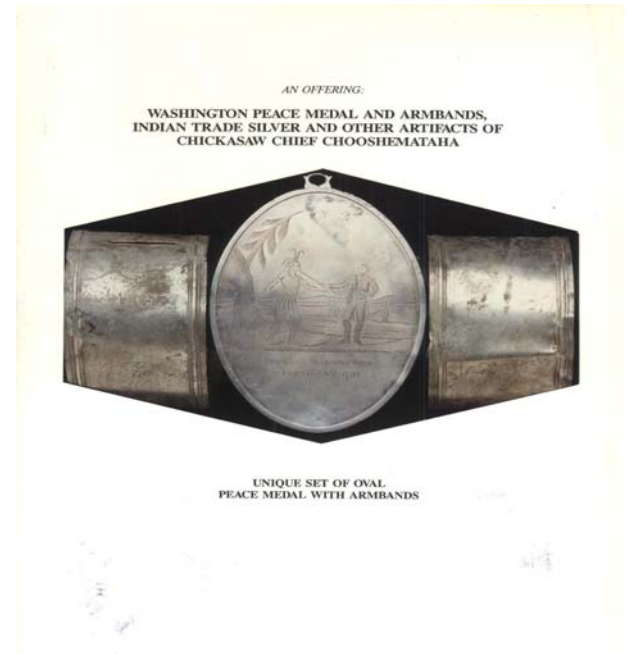
Dear John--

Happy New Year! I have a question for you. Attached is a scan of the front cover of a publication I cannot identify. The title is "An Offering: Washington Peace Medal and Armbands, Indian Trade Silver and Other Artifacts of Chicksaw Chief Chooshemataha." It's 4 to, in card covers, 8 pages, with one fine color photographic plate on Kodak paper depicting a 1793 oval Washington Peace Medal and an accompanying set of armbands. There is nothing to identify the publisher at all, as far as I can see. The materials being offered are blatant grave finds, which may explain the lack of identification. Any idea who published this? Thanks.

Hope all's well with you and that you've enjoyed good holidays.

Best,

David F. Fanning



(Can anyone help?—ed.)

Dear John:

I just received the latest issue of the MCA Advisory, and I wanted to congratulate you on another fine issue. In my quest for knowledge about medals, I always find that I learn something new in every issue.

I wanted to drop you a note to continue our correspondence on the George III Large Size Indian peace medals that you mentioned in an earlier message. I see that two different medals of this type are offered at an upcoming auction, and each has a different look to them. One of the George III medals is described as having well polished, highly reflective surfaces which are typical of actual Indian wear and usage. It also has old marks and scratches on both sides. The other medal, however, is not polished or reflective, and it has very nice steel,

lilac, and blue toning on both sides. There is an absence of marks on this particular medal.

In the federal coin context, people tend to look at things like wear, polish, nicks, marks, etc. in a negative light. It seems that only the most pristine examples of federal coins are worthy of being collected, which is unfortunate in my opinion.

In the Indian peace medal context, I would be interested in hearing your views on whether these characteristics (such as polish and nicks) are more likely to be overlooked and accepted, because it is expected that the medals were actually worn by prominent Indian chiefs. In a sense, does this evidence of use actually add to the history and therefore, the desirability, of the pieces? I would expect that a pristine example of these medals would not be nearly as interesting, especially since it is likely that a pristine example was never even worn or used by an Indian chief.

I would be interested in hearing your thoughts.

Kind regards,

Michael Savinelli

Mike,

This is a great question/issue. I will place your letter in the January issue and then invite some of our solons to speak up (as will I). I love the undated George III's because they were generally awarded in a considered fashion for some solid diplomatic reason. In contrast, the more sophisticated-looking medals of 1814 were handed out to whomever would have one.

Best,

John

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